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Leviathan mine to get Superfund money for cleanup

By Jeff DeLong
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An abandoned Sierra sulfur mine that for decades has belched a toxic soup of acids and heavy metals into tributaries of the Carson River was listed Wednesday as a federal Superfund site.

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Local officials acknowledged nervousness over dealing with the federal government but lauded a decision they hope will clean up one of the region's most polluted messes.

"It's time to get the site cleaned up, and if this accomplishes that, it's wonderful news," said Jacques Etchegoyhen, chairman of the Douglas County Commission. "We've got to keep the prize in mind which is clean water in the Carson River."

For more than a year officials with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have debated the merits of placing Leviathan Mine on a national priority list for the Superfund program. On Wednesday, the mine joined six other places as a new Superfund site — status reserved for the country's most polluted spots. There are now 1,227 Superfund sites nationwide, 98 in California. Nevada's only Superfund site is a stretch of the lower Carson River contaminated by mercury associated with mining during the Comstock era.

"This action will provide us with the formal regulatory authority necessary to clean up a very complex site that continues to threaten an otherwise pristine environment," said Keith Takata, director of EPA's Superfund division in San Francisco. "Now we an roll up our sleeves and focus entirely on stemming the flow of contamination into nearby creeks and watersheds."

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Leviathan Mine, in Alpine County, Calif., about 25 miles southwest of Gardnerville, produced copper sulfate from 1863 until 1872, then was reopened for a six-year period to produce sulfur beginning in 1936. From the 1950s to early 1960s, open pit mining was used to extract sulfur until the mine was finally shut down in 1962.

State and federal agencies have spent more than \$6 million since 1982 trying to halt acidic pollution that drains into Leviathan Creek and eventually into the Carson River. Contaminants have wiped out all aquatic life in the creek and downstream water users, including Douglas County and the Washoe Tribe, fear the Carson River is threatened.

Superfund status should allow more federal funding to focus on the problem and also make the Atlantic Richfield Co. — which acquired the mine from the Anaconda Corp. in 1978 — liable for cleanup costs.

“The Leviathan Mine is nothing short of an environmental nightmare, but this assistance will finally help us correct the problem at its source,” said Sen. Richard Bryan, D-Nev., who organized a tour for local officials of the mine last October. “This designation will finally begin the process of providing the necessary safeguards to properly protect not only the environment but the health and safety of many Nevada residents.”

The problem: Water draining through mine tailings at Leviathan Mine turns sulfur into sulfuric acid which in turn dissolves minerals like arsenic and aluminum. The toxic mix has destroyed aquatic life in at least one stream and threatens the Carson River.

Public meeting: Environmental Protection Agency to discuss Leviathan Mine cleanup and Superfund status, 7 p.m. May 24 at the library of Carson Middle School in Gardnerville.

Questions: Kevin Mayer (415) 744-2248 or Vicki Rosen (415) 744-2187.

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